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SUBJECT: LIBERIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES DISCUSSES TRC PROCESS

¶1. SUMMARY. The members of the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) told Ambassador that healing and reconciliation are more important than a harsh application of justice in dealing with perpetrators

from the civil war. They fear that calls for prosecution will lead to renewed strife. Election reform is also quickly needed before the next general election. They are also concerned that problems in Guinea and Sierra Leone may spill over into Liberia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Ambassador met with the Liberian Council of Churches, on December 7 to discuss the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (TRC) and their response. Chaired by Bishop John Innis, the LCC represents most major Christian denominations in Liberia, and has roughly 20 members, most of whom were present. LCC Secretary General Lartey provided an official statement on the LCC's position about the TRC process with several members adding in their views.

HEALING NEEDED MORE THAN JUSTICE

¶3. LCC Secretary General Dr. Benjamin Lartey emphasized the need for healing and reconciliation instead of the TRC's call for prosecutions against warlords. He said that the LCC did not attend the Virginia Conference held by the TRC in July because the council felt the TRC minimized the role of the churches in the reconciliation process and they objected to the TRC's call for prosecutions. The LCC held meetings with warlords, civil society, women, youth, Legislative leaders and President Sirleaf before they responded publicly to the TRC report.

¶4. Lartey reported that the final, edited version of the TRC will contain 160 more names for prosecution, though they have not yet received a copy. He told Ambassador that they fear this additional list will polarize society, and attempts to implement the TRC report could cause additional civil uproar. (Note: TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier told Poloff on December 8 that the final report includes 17 more names of Liberians, and 100 names of foreigners.)

¶5. Bishop Harris, an LCC member, said that to facilitate healing, the LCC discussed hosting a National Week of Prayer, and counseling sessions for perpetrators and victims. Pastors of local churches could hold private sessions with perpetrators in their congregations and foster public apologies and reconciliation with victims. He said that many perpetrators of the conflict attend church seeking redemption and could be addressed from the pulpit.

ELECTION CONCERNS

¶6. In addition to the TRC, Lartey said that free elections are a key element to healing Liberia. He reported that the LCC is worried that election bills will not be dealt with quickly enough, and might postpone the 2011 general election. Besides the Threshold Bill, the LCC would like to see passage of an act to allow Legislators to be elected by simple majority vote, rather than 50% +1 which would require expensive runoff elections, the election of local officials, and acts to better define local entities. As an example, Secretary General Lartey offered Grand Kru County, the smallest in Liberia, with 60 municipalities, more than Montserrado County, the most

populous.

¶17. Secretary General Lartey said that refining the election process will be a lengthy political battle and expressed concern that it will not be finished before the next general election in November 2011. He added that it is important to get this process done right, but that a postponement of the next election would be seen as a grab for power by President Sirleaf. He said that the LCC plans to hold a sit-in at the next Legislative session in January if action on the election bills is not taken swiftly enough.

OTHER CONCERNS

¶18. LCC member Alex Banga expressed concern about the situation in Guinea and the postponing of elections in Cote d'Ivoire. Either situation could affect the peace in Liberia. Mr. James Calhoun mentioned the illegal arms trade and asked for international help in restricting arms supplies. He said two recent news reports of uncovered arms caches sparked this concern. (Note: One report of weapons found in Firestone last week is confirmed. News reports of this find today may be mistaken as a separate cache.) Mr. Calhoun also asked the Ambassador for help in monitoring DDDR activities and alleged that West African mercenaries are still at large in the interior of Liberia where there is no local government structure to deal with them.

¶19. COMMENT: The LCC is a powerful group in Liberia and well placed to foster reconciliation. While all members were allowed to speak, only the leadership presented the LCC view as a whole, and we cannot be sure that feeling was unanimous. This also was the first indication as to how deep the rift between the TRC and LCC had become, explaining better why many who were dissatisfied with the

than a harsh application of justice in dealing with perpetrators from the civil war. They fear that calls for prosecution will lead to renewed strife. Election reform is also quickly needed before the next general election. They are also concerned that problems in Guinea and Sierra Leone may spill over into Liberia. END SUMMARY.

TRC report turned to the LCC for support. The Ambassador told the LCC that their powerful voice is needed to lead Liberia into a peaceful future.
THOMAS-GREENFIELD